

Sketch

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Old Jim

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Old Jim

By Eugene Hess, '40

OLD Jim was a symbol around our part of the country. He was a fixture at every Saturday night dance, a necessity as much as the orchestra or the ticket taker. He was well in his eighties, gaunt and stooped, a fuzz of snow-white hair ringing his partly bald head, a pair of faded blue eyes smiling out at you with childlike faith from a care-lined, deep-wrinkled, wind-reddened face. He lived at the County Poor Farm and walked the mile and a half to town every dance night. Hot or cold, rain or snow, Old Jim would trudge down the long road, dusty in the summer time and knee-deep with snow in the winter, with a steady smile on his face and an anticipatory gleam in his eyes.

Once in the hall, where he was always admitted free, he would take his accustomed place, just to the right of the door, watching everybody who came in and everything that happened on the floor. For all of his rheumy eyes and shaggy, brushlike eyebrows, he never missed very much of what was going on. He would be the first to arrive and the last to leave, and would sit there all evening in his one white shirt and a flaming red necktie, with his red-scrubbed, big-knuckled hands folded calmly in his lap. His hands were somehow symbolic of Old Jim—calloused, broken-jointed, stiffened and gnarled by years of hard labor and pain-wracked by long years of rheumatism—the accumulation of a lifetime spent in labor close to the soil, in making and creating things, in wringing a bare livelihood from the reluctant earth. With all his hardships and suffering, which were common knowledge to the country-side, he was now content to sit on the sidelines, calmly waiting for his tide to run out while he watched the gay, young life flow by in an effervescent stream that he had missed in his youth.

Everybody knew him and spoke to him, inquiring after his health, and asking his opinion of the music. All the girls would sit by him at some time during the dance, slip their hands through his arm, and ask him to dance with them. His old eyes would light up with joy, his steady smile would spread into a grin, and he would cackle with glee as he playfully shoved them away from him saying, "If I was just twenty years younger, I'd show these young squirts a thing or two about dancing and I'd steal some of their gals—dad-burned if I wouldn't." Then he would grin like the very mischief, shaken with inward laughter, and the girls would dash off in a gay-colored swirl of dancing frocks, gleaming smiles and sparkling, talking eyes—leaving Old Jim sitting there, smiling to himself and lost in a pleasant, misty-eyed reverie of years ago.

When the orchestra was stilled, the last dancer had gone, the musicians were packed up, and the lights being turned out, Old Jim would rouse himself and get up. To all offers of a lift or a ride, he would smile and look at you as if he were seeing clear through you to some hidden, pleasant secret, known only to himself, and say, "No thankee, Son—I like to be alone on the road—just me, and the stars above."

